

SERMON: Sunday – 8 January 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

All age ministry

Psalm 131

Luke 2:22-38

According to the STB material the poet and playwright Oscar Wilde is famously reported to have written “I am not young enough to know everything.”

I had to read that a couple of times before it sunk in.

As witty as this may be, and it certainly sounds like something he might have said, there is no evidence that it actually comes from his published works. Never mind, whatever the origin, this is a phrase that will sound accurate to some. The notion that age brings wisdom is something that we seem to have accepted as a fact of life. **The longer we live, the wiser we become**—empirically we know that it is not always true—but sometimes it is. The longer we live the more experiences we have, the more lessons we have the opportunity to learn, and if we are willing, allow these to help us grow and develop.

It is no exaggeration to say that for a lot (if not most) churches in Scotland, and in many other places, one of the constant refrains is that **“we need more young people.”** Our Church families are becoming ever older and are often not being replenished by droves of younger people queueing to join. It is a problem that most church communities face, and one that is becoming more and more serious each passing year.

We need to figure out how to bring the Good News to whole new communities, and whole new generations. But in the midst of all this, we should also remember that it does not mean we should ignore those who are already there, already propping up churches, already giving their time, talent, and money to ensure that their community has a fighting chance in a changing world.

The passage from Luke, chosen for today, is an interesting one, not least because of the noteworthy point that Simeon having praised God for Jesus’ arrival, speaks to Mary, not Joseph about the wonders that Jesus is destined for. But possibly the most interesting aspect of the story is what comes at the end, the description of the Prophet Anna.

An old woman, who spends night and day in the temple, who does nothing but pray, fast, and worship God. In this scene we have the promise of youth in Jesus and in Mary. The elders have been waiting, like many of us, for the coming of a new generation, a new sign from God, a new beginning for them all, and they receive it, but that does not mean the elders become invisible or are ignored. Anna, though she has spent so many years locked away from the world, though she is undoubtedly coming near to the end of her life, though she may not be able to do the things she might have done, she has an important role in this story. She tells all who would listen about the coming of Jesus.

As many churches face up to the reality of the changing world, as they look out amongst their number and wonder: how do we reach younger people? Might this passage offer us a chance to stop, to pause, to reflect and remind ourselves, that though we need more young people (and we do!), we also need those who are not so young, for they have many talents, much wisdom, and a wealth of experience that many are ready and willing to offer to their communities if they are given the chance.

And we see that in practise week by week as many of you volunteer to serve at the warm hub, in the Reuse and Thrive shop, serving teas, delivering cards, attending prayer meetings or praying at home.

If it wasn't for older people the church would not be here.

And as I get older, I'm more and more glad that's the case. That there are always opportunities for older people to praise God and to serve and to encourage one another and to build up the young with words of wisdom and to feel valued for who they are irrespective of what they feel able to do or not.

Anna and Simeon were old. They didn't get too see Jesus the man, hear him speak, see him heal and do miraculous things. Yet they had great faith that this child, this baby in their arms, would grow into the Promise they'd been waiting and hoping for. For them, it was enough, the Promise was enough, the Reality would come later but in the meantime this was enough.

There's a lesson there for us all. That what God gives us today is enough. The rest will come. We've got what we need by the gracious hand of our God who knows everything we need and has given us everything we need in Christ our Light of the World.

I came across this wee reflection on the story which I came across this week: Anna and Simeon saw.

Through their aged eyes they saw the one who would redeem.

Having waited,

in hope, for a lifetime
they saw,
they praised,
they proclaimed,
sharing the hope and the promise.

Through the eyes of an old woman and an old man
the light of the world was revealed.
Thanks be to God.

Last Sunday, New Year's Day, Sunday Worship on Radio 4 focussed on John Newton and the hymn Amazing Grace.

Newton said as an older man there are two things I know - that I'm a great sinner and Christ is a great saviour.

As a young man Newton was a bit of a rebel who was press ganged into joining the Royal Navy, beaten and whipped, he managed to escape only to be captured and held as a slave himself.

Later on he became a slave trader himself, losing what faith he had to become a free thinker and anti God blasphemmer.

As a merchant navy captain and slave trader, Newton nearly died at sea several times and eventually began to doubt his doubts and started to look in the Bible for answers.

And so it was much later in life, as an old man, he became a vicar and anti-slavery abolitionist.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I'm found was blind but now I see.

It's never too late to experience that amazing grace of God.
It's never too late to do the right thing.
You're never too old in God's eyes.
Amen.